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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: EUR DAS BRYZA MEETS WITH PM BAKRADZE,
MINISTER SHASHKIN ON MARCH 13, 14

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: EUR DAS Matt Bryza met with Speaker of Parliament David Bakradze and discussed the future of the UNOMIG, OSCE, and EUMM monitoring missions as well as domestic politics. Minister of Corrections and Legal Assistance Dimitri Shashkin explained his vision for revamping the penal system as well as his role as the point man in the GOG to facilitate democratic reform. End Summary.

PM Bakradze on Monitoring Missions and U.S. - Russian Relations

¶2. (C) Bakradze said that as a baseline, no monitoring missions in Georgia are preferable to compromises that would serve to give South Ossetia and Abkhazia some sort of recognition as independent entities. Bakradze said he thought the Greeks put forth a stronger effort than he expected as OSCE chair-in-office, but the Russians would never agree to any realistic compromise to continue the OSCE mission to Georgia. Bakradze hoped that OSCE members would make clear that the Russians were solely to blame for killing the OSCE mission in Georgia, given Georgia's continuing support for "status neutral" proposals of Greece (and Finland in December). The Speaker said that with respect to Abkhazia, any workable solution would have to internationalize the police and security situation in the breakaway region which he described as "getting out of control." Bakradze expressed his fear that the EU would cave to Russian pressure on monitoring issues and that without a workable UN mandate in Abkhazia, the situation could explode.

¶3. (C) Bakradze was not concerned about the reset in relations between the U.S. and Russia. DAS Bryza recounted Secretary Clinton's statement that any reset did not change U.S. policy towards Georgia, namely, U.S. opposition to Russian mistreatment of its neighbors and attempts to dominate energy export routes to Europe. Bakradze mentioned that he was very pleased with public comments by both Secretary Clinton and Vice President Biden regarding Georgia and unwavering U.S. support for Georgia's territorial integrity. Nevertheless, Bakradze was skeptical as to how much the Russians would reset their relationship to work constructively or in good faith with the United States regarding either Georgia or Iran. The Speaker believed that the Russians were starting to regret their decision to occupy and recognize the breakaway regions. In Bakradze's opinion, the Russians would try desperately to "legalize" their occupation, and he urged the U.S. to continue to work to deny the Russians occupation any international legitimacy.

Bakradze - Ready to Work with Opposition but Fears the Worst

¶4. (C) Bakradze opened the discussion on the domestic political scene by requesting that U.S. representatives treat former UN Ambassador and current opposition leader, Irakli Alasania in the same manner as other opposition leaders. Bakradze explained that Alasania (and his camp) had been using access to U.S. officials as a way to initiate rumors suggesting the U.S. supports the overthrow of Saakashvili and

would like to install Alasania as president. Bakradze said that he understood these rumors were absurd, but said they were nonetheless widely believed. (Reftel) Bakradze said he regarded Alasania as a friend and respected him a great deal but thought that Alasania had a lot to learn as a politician and had been making dubious political decisions, namely joining David Gamkrelidze (New Rights) and David Usupashvili's (Republicans) parties. He questioned whether QUsupashvili's (Republicans) parties. He questioned whether Alasania could salvage his political reputation if he makes the short-term decision to support the demands of the most radical members of the non-parliamentary opposition.

¶15. (C) Bakradze said that Nino Burjanadze had become unexpectedly radical. Bakradze was disappointed that virtually no non-parliamentary groups joined the election legislation working group. He added that he expected no further progress with the increasingly radical non-opposition until after the April 9 protests. Bakradze said that he would always leave the door open should anybody change their minds, but he did not sound optimistic about the path of the non-parliamentary opposition. Bakradze felt that many among the non-parliamentary opposition only wanted confrontation and were looking for ways to provoke violence. (Embassy Note: A similar feeling is prevalent among the parliamentary opposition, and Alasania himself shared the Speaker's view. End Note.). Bakradze said the problem was not peaceful people in the street, and that the GOG welcomed the prospect of large numbers of peaceful protestors voicing their views. Rather, he feared potential violence that could be stoked by a few provocateurs in the crowd, which could force the GOG to react to a mob storming Parliament or the Presidential Administration.

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¶16. (C) Bakradze said that neither he nor President Saakashvili would resign their offices no matter how many protestors gathered in the street. Bakradze said he understood that a number of reasonable people were dissatisfied with the GOG, but he did not sense a similar feeling of acute anger in the air as he did in November 2007.

Bakradze said he thought the non-parliamentary opposition felt the same way, making Bakradze more fearful that certain protestors would try to spark anger by provoking a GOG crackdown. Bakradze indicated that the GOG knew this and would not respond like it had in the past. Lastly, Bakradze said that a recent internal UNM poll showed Saakashvili's rating at 45 percent positive versus 39 percent negative. Bakradze said support for UNM members and the GOG had dropped somewhat, but the only opposition figure that received any substantial support was Christian Democratic Leader Giorgi Targamadze.

Dmitri Shashkin On Reforms

¶17. (C) Former IRI Chief of Party and current Minister of Corrections and Legal Assistance Shashkin stated that the GOG viewed the media; private property rights; judicial system; and the penal system as the four areas in which to focus its reform efforts. On the media, Shashkin said that he was working with NGOs to develop objective criteria to evaluate progress or lack thereof concerning media freedom (septel). Shashkin stated that probation reform was a priority and explained that his ministry did not have an accurate list to track those on probation. Shashkin mentioned improving health care for the incarcerated and living conditions among his other key priorities, with the Ministry of Health reluctant to take on this responsibility.

¶18. (C) On larger political issues, Shashkin said that the GOG had formed a task force to work through scenarios to plan a coordinated response to the April 9 protests. He said that the GOG planned a hands off, non confrontational approach as much as reasonably possible. Having painted themselves into a corner, Shashkin feared that the non-parliamentary

opposition would try to provoke violence. Shaskin said he was trying to engage non-parliamentary leaders to find a constructive and face saving way out. Shashkin said that unfortunately, many non-parliamentary leaders had staked everything on April 9, so he was not optimistic that his efforts would be fruitful. Shashkin stressed that the GOG would seek to avoid violence at all costs. He noted that the special prison forces under his command were perhaps the most effective crowd control personnel in Georgia. For precisely this reason, Shahskin planned to keep them off the streets on April 9. "These guys know and want to do only one thing beat people. We will therefore keep them away from the protestors."

TEFFT